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Teaching Ethical Excellence

Artful Response-Ability, Creative Integrity, Character Opus

**Ethics is “majoring”
in one’s life
as a whole,
not just one’s
studies or career**

MOST UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS acknowledge the need to engender social responsibility, at least among students. College mission statements feature this goal front and center.

Whether or not dishonesty or irresponsibility is common on campus, students must develop their moral insight and reasoning skills simply to assume adult roles and the more complex responsibilities that go along with them. To its credit, higher education is trying to address this challenge through both ethics courses (theory) and service programs (practice). Still, most programs focus on a narrow, pet area of the ethical network: character and virtue; ethical problem solving or reasoning; value awareness, self-responsibility and discipline; ethical role requirements within complex institutions; ethical codes of conduct; community service learning; ethical mentors, coaches, and role models; civic and citizenship education. And this has led to competition among camps—a competition of inadequacy.

A few programs offer more inclusive alternatives (see Colby et al. 2003), but they are not being adopted more widely due to the academic ethos of unique originality. Each school seems to feel it must reinvent the wheel. Looking at the various program foci, instead, as components of a more inclusive program, let us consider how some main themes can be enhanced.

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Responsibility focus

A great contribution to ethics is the feminist distinction between responsibility and “response-ability.” A standard responsibility is a felt requirement, a debt owed, usually a burdensome duty that restricts our individual(istic) freedom. It requires us to sacrifice self-interests for the interests of others, usually against the pull of our wills. This not only makes ethics a hard sell motivationally, but it also reflects the moralistic, child-like view of ethics as imposed taskmaster rather than as expressive tool. A nonstandard sense of responsibility accords our role in relationships more due and allows us to see responsibility as the ability to respond to others—to respond well and self-gratifyingly. This transforms the restrictive drawbacks of responsible compliance into attractive opportunities to shine.

A “response-ability” viewpoint makes better sense of our responsibilities toward ourselves as well, including our growth or development and our personal integrity. The standard picture of self-responsibility, where we force ourselves to do things, cannot represent the self-discipline or self-determination involved as true freedom—except through sleight of hand abetted by self-delusion. And ethics must be free; it must organize voluntary cooperation, not cooperation-or-else. By contrast, self-response-ability focuses us on our own worth and the value of our talents or potentials. It enhances our self-appreciation and rests on our predictable response to what we really are and can become.



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Compare this ethics of response and inspiration with “doing the right thing for its own sake.” The latter is often held up as the only proper moral motivation, or as morality’s noblest motivational ideal. But it’s an ideal that conflicts with human nature and the laws of psychology. Even when we can twist our nature somehow to generate such motives, they tend to bring out the worst in us—sheepishness, conformity, and masochism. They leave us defenseless in the face of raw power, aggressive competition, and everyday exploitation by the self-interested. Long experience with being taken advantage of reveals the futility of this orientation. It thus pushes us toward personal hypocrisy, toward the use of ethics as window dressing to hide pragmatism, and toward the relegation of ethics to the dustbin of idealism or utopian dreaming. In everyday life, these problems render our ethical behavior begrudging, not self-affirming or fulfilling. If these are the categories students will use to organize their ethics education, the task is futile and possibly counterproductive. Thus, moving to nonstandard themes and approaches is a must.

Integrity focus

A second valuable distinction in ethics comes from moral exemplar literature (see Oliner and Oliner 1988; Colby and Damon 1992; Puka 1993). Gandhi distinguished sharply between honesty and integrity, as did Aristotle in his *Ethics*. For Gandhi, integrity meant living one’s life as an open book. It meant conducting a long series of experiments in better living that others could analyze, learn from, and criticize. To our limited moral imaginations, this lifestyle seems difficult. So we brand it as “ideal” and

“beyond the call of duty”—the stuff of super-human effort and humanity. We need not feel expected, therefore, to give it a whirl. But such integrity is not a difficult pursuit: our character isn’t at stake if we fail. The ethical pressure is off. All we can expect of ourselves here is to try, and try something new, not to exert ourselves overly on tasks we already dread.

Experiments often fail and are expected to do so. Thus success is not demanded, as it is by standard ethical obligation. When we fail, we cannot really be blamed. After all, we are dedicating our whole lives to our betterment in dealing with others. What more can be expected of us? Failure is automatically followed by trying again, and trying better by design and routine. Where someone is hurt in the process, I simply try to compensate. I apologize, but have little to apologize for since my experiments show unusual care to avoid such consequences. The next attempt routinely takes greater precautions. Acquiring greater virtues—becoming someone better—is the continual aim and likely consequence here, not preserving my ego or its precious moral character. Contrast this ongoing routine of full-life integrity with mere honesty—with the struggle of not telling lies or with being a “man of my word.”

Character focus

In distinguishing honesty, ethical consistency, and integrity, Aristotle saw the last as character itself. Character is the full integration of our admirable traits and abilities into an admirably functioning virtue system. It includes the habituation of these abilities, their motivational supports, and their expression. It includes the

good judgment that must retool the manner of their expression in unusual or especially difficult social contexts, and it includes the developing artfulness of social interaction. Aristotle's two essays on ethics, which have defined the very term itself in western culture, pose integrity as the spring of excellence in living. They put the art in living, in relating to others, and in being an exemplary type of person. The more we adopt Aristotle's encompassing definition of ethics as living well and flourishing, the more and better ethics integrates with our daily lives.

To be ethical is to be practical also. It is to work well at one's job and pursue a diligent career. It is to balance work artfully with family, exemplary parenting, and community involvement. In the liberal arts college especially, students are urged to nurture excellence in a major concentration of study and to nurture some lesser competence in a minor area. The rest is relegated to "literacy"—be it math literacy or literature—the ability to understand from outside what's going on in some area and to converse with those focusing on it. For Aristotle, ethics is "majoring" in one's life as a whole, not just one's studies or career. It is majoring in oneself and one's relationships to make them artful, to make them the best they can be. Ethics is making one's contribution to society and to humanity.

Students are already convinced of the need for competence in their education and for excellence in developing the skills that will help them land a good job. They also understand that there's a good deal more than this to successful living, which also involves doing something that is meaningful, finding love, and belonging. Students understand that, even outside what society normally would term ethics. They know that some values are superficial and fleeting, while others are deep and lasting. Thus, Aristotelian ethics does not have to come out of left field and make the case for not doing what we wish to do or what works. Education itself is ethics, and so too are social life, home life, and citizenship. Scientific research is ethics, as is writing. The key is to achieve balance and proportion. This shows integrity. This is integrity.

From this vantage point, calling for special courses or programs in collegiate ethics seems odd. So do attempts to integrate ethics across the curriculum. It's already there. It must merely be found, highlighted, and developed further.

Ethics is know-how developed in pursuits that are worth doing. It is know-how in distinguishing better and worse values or goals, especially through practice and experience, reflection and discussion with others. (This is why know-how in lying, manipulating, thieving, and the like are not ethical; they are inferior uses of great skills, employed for inferior ends.)

Ethics is personal entrepreneurship and interpersonal management at their excellent extremes. It is good business in the business of life. By contrast, look at what currently passes for management in business and even in some business courses. Arbitrary authority hierarchies dominate, dispensing childlike incentives to employees—from intimidation and threats to perquisites and bonuses. Burgeoning adults are reduced to children here.

The same can be said for standard parenting. We expect even our youngest children to negotiate their interactions reasonably and their conflicts fairly, not by threatening or hitting each other, but by "using their words" and "playing nice." Yet parents wouldn't dream of holding themselves to such standards even when dealing with their outmatched toddlers. Well prior to so-called spanking (assault and battery), parents resort to every small-minded form of deception, manipulation, intimidation, and authoritarianism in the book: "because it's time to go"; "because you have to"; "I'll count to ten, and then you'll be sorry"; "because I'm the mommy, that's why." In an Aristotelian ethics curriculum, parent training would be prominent, along with childhood training (especially toward aging parents). So too would the arts of loving relationship generally. After all, what is more important or valuable? □

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